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SUBJECT: ISRAELI REACTION TO FATAH CONGRESS MIXED

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Luis G. Moreno, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. We have noted a mixed Israeli reaction to the Sixth Fatah Congress and the elections to the Fatah Central Committee. Repeated references to the legitimacy of "resistance" and "popular struggle" in Congress speeches have raised concern among many Israelis, yet at the same time, there is appreciation that Abu Mazen succeeded in strengthening his leadership position while, in the Israeli view at least, shoring up Fatah's image among Palestinians. Our interlocutors also point out that a stronger Fatah is likely to undermine Prime Minister Fayyad, whom the GOI sees as their most serious peace partner. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Israeli commentators have reacted along predictable political lines to the Sixth Fatah Congress in Bethlehem, with much attention devoted to speeches by Fatah leaders emphasizing the legitimacy of "resistance," (muqaawamah in Arabic), a term long used by Palestinians to describe terrorist attacks. Repeated Fatah affirmations of their support for "popular struggle," along with the pro forma insistence on Fatah's commitment to the refugees' "right of return," led commentators on the right to suggest that the Fatah Congress had proved the lack of Palestinian commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Commentators on the left, however, found sufficient evidence of Fatah expression of support for diplomacy and a peaceful process to reinforce their view that now is the time to resolve the conflict. Former Minister of Internal Security Avi Dichter, now a Kadima Member of Knesset, warned that Fatah's rhetoric could lead to a third Intifadah. The IDF Central Command was reportedly concerned enough to convene a meeting with PA security counterparts at which the IDF commanders asked about the significance of references to armed struggle and "popular resistance" at the Congress.

¶3. (C) As the Fatah congress concluded, the attention turned from rhetoric to the election of a new Central Committee. The Director and Deputy Director of MFA's Political Research department, Nimrod Barkan and Yaacov Amitai, told PolCouns August 11 that the Congress was a major political success for Abu Mazen, first because he managed to convene it at all, but even more so because he showed the political ability to engineer a favorable outcome in the Central Committee elections in particular. In their view, the election of Fatah leaders in their late forties and fifties would help energize Fatah and reestablish its credibility vis a vis Hamas. Similarly, a senior MOD official told us that he thought Abu Mazen had won "six months of breathing space" during which he would not be under pressure from Hamas in the West Bank.

¶4. (C) Barkan and Amitai appeared relatively unconcerned about rhetorical flourishes during the Congress, acknowledging Fatah's need to compete with Hamas, although Barkan noted that many GOI officials had a less understanding attitude. He said Foreign Minister Lieberman was calling him several times a day to see if the Congress had released a

final declaration. (Note: Lieberman appeared to hope that such a declaration would be full of quotes that could be interpreted as calls for violence against Israel.)

15. (U) Lieberman told a group of visiting Democratic members of Congress sponsored by AIPAC August 10 that "a situation whereby there is a split between Hamastan in the Gaza Strip and Fatahland in the West Bank, together with the Fatah platform that is being formulated, bury any possibility of reaching a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians in the coming years." Lieberman went on to say, "Given this set of circumstances, Israeli policy needs to be based on reality rather than delusions. We need to preserve a dialogue with the Palestinians, improve their security and economic situation, but this is the maximum that can be attained in the near future."

16. (C) While Barkan and Amitai gave Abu Mazen high marks for his political skill, they also expressed concern that the election of former security chiefs such as Mohammed Dahlan, Tawfiq Tirawi and Jibril Rajoub to the Central Committee could spell trouble for PM Fayyad, and in particular for Fayyad's ability to maintain control of the PA Security Forces. While Barkan noted Fayyad's lack of a strong political base and his political dependence on Abu Mazen's good will, Barkan nonetheless argued that Fayyad has become indispensable to the PA's credibility with Israel as well as to the international donor community.

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